



# Am I alive?

On 4 April 1977, one flight attendant's life was changed forever.

## Sandy Purl

Since the beginning of our early morning shift, our crew had flown in and out of Atlanta all day on short hops. Cathy Cooper, the other flight attendant, and I had spent nearly all our air time strapped in our jumpseats because of rough skies.

The cockpit crew was just about my favourite. The captain, Bill, always treated flight attendants as fellow professionals with an important role on the airplane. Apart from the professional respect I had for him, he was also a friend.

The first officer, Lyman, was a handsome, dark-haired former Navy pilot, twenty years younger than the captain. He loved telling stories and jokes and was wonderful company.

On the ground in Huntsville Alabama, Cathy welcomed new passengers while I prepared the cabin. There were a total of 81 passengers for the flight back to Atlanta. I

was assigned to the rear of the DC-9, and quickly checked to see that all baggage was stowed, seatbelts fastened, and tray tables up. No sooner had I finished my inspection than we began a short taxi – so short that Cathy and I hardly had time to demonstrate the safety instructions before taking our own seats.

**Hail stones:** The plane quickly climbed through the nasty weather – and then descended a couple of thousand feet. I assumed the cockpit crew was checking radar and talking with ground control to find a smoother course through the storm.

Suddenly hail began battering the metal roof. Every passenger in the plane turned in unison and looked at me. I fought to keep the calm on my face.

Then, above the clattering din, I heard three explosions – Pow! Pow! Pow! – in the left engine. The cabin lights flickered, and the

emergency lights kicked on for 15-20 seconds before power was restored. But the familiar droning of the left jet was gone. I wondered if the engine had ripped away from the plane.

A few moments later, the hail stopped. I picked up the PA mike again. My own calmness surprised me as I reassured the passengers: “Keep your seatbelts on and securely fastened. There’s nothing to be alarmed about. Relax, we should be out of the storm shortly...”

The lights flickered and went out again. When the power returned, I went on with the instructions I’d been drilled to give. “Please check to see that all carry-on baggage is stowed completely under the seat in front of you. In the unlikely event that there is a need for an emergency landing, we do ask that you please grab your ankles. If I scream instructions from the rear of the aircraft, there is nothing to be alarmed about. But in the event there is an emergency and you do hear us holler, please

grab your ankles. Thank you for your cooperation and just relax. These are precautionary measures only.”

As I finished my announcement, I strained to hear the sound of the right engine. I could hear a steady hum, but it didn't seem normal either. My ears had popped about the time the left engine went and the cabin temperature was quickly rising, so I knew we'd decompressed. Then I smelled smoke – like something electrical burning. I pictured the plane exploding in mid-air and scattering us over the north Georgia countryside.

**In the cockpit:** In the cockpit, First Officer Lyman Keele flew the crippled DC-9 while Captain William McKenzie raised Atlanta Center on the radio. “Okay, Flight 242 here. We just got our windshield busted, and we'll try to get back up to 15,000 feet. We're at 14,000,” McKenzie reported. After checking the top set of gauges on the centre console, he added, “Our left engine just cut out.”

Less than 30 seconds passed. Suddenly Keele exclaimed, “My God, the other engine's going too...”

During the next five-and-a-half minutes, the pilots tried desperately to restart the dead engines. Keele reset his course for Dobbins Air Force Base in Marietta. But the field was twenty miles away, and Flight 242 was losing altitude rapidly.

**Emergency briefing:** The instant I smelled fire, I knew we were in real trouble. Any second I expected an emergency signal from the cockpit. It didn't come, so I finally acted on my own. I unbuckled my seatbelt, stood, and quickly made my way forward to row 11. Trying to control my voice, I reassured everyone that there was nothing to be alarmed about – storm situations such as the one we were experiencing simply called for an emergency briefing.

This is standard procedure, I said, as calmly and convincingly as I could. “But I want you to listen carefully to all my instructions.” I demonstrated the brace position for landing – hands on ankles, head between my knees.

I individually briefed the people sitting at the window exits, showing them where to pull and how to lift the windows out, and making each one repeat my instructions so I knew he understood. I also told them they were to slide down the trailing edge of the wing and wait to help the passengers following. Everyone was to run 50 yards upwind of the plane. Then I told all the passengers to take off their shoes and stow their eyeglasses in the seat pocket in front of them.

Aware that Cathy had started briefing passengers in the front, I hurried to the rear, to show the passengers in the last seats their escape route. Asking them to get out their briefing cards, I showed how to open the rear bulkhead door, jettison the tail cone, and inflate the tail-cone slide. My jumpseat was the closest to the rear exit, but I didn't think I'd survive impact. I would be strapped into my seat between the engines, and if they didn't explode I was certain to be knocked out or have both legs broken when my jumpseat collapsed.

If I'm incapacitated,” I told the man in seat 20B, “Your job will be to drag my body out of the way and get to the door as quickly as possible. You won't have time to mess with me, so just pull my body over behind these seats and get out.”

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He nodded obediently. In fact, every passenger on board the plane responded unquestioningly to my every order without panic, as if I was some sort of goddess. I couldn't believe their calm.

**Impact:** I knew we were low. But thinking we were descending into the Atlanta airport, I kept expecting to hear the five-bell emergency landing signal at any moment. When I noticed a male passenger get up and move to an aisle seat nearer the back, I ran forward and shouted, “Sit down! Now!” I returned to my seat and was standing, leaning forward to put my glasses in a pocket in the last row of seats when I glimpsed tree trunks out the window to my left. Still assuming we were landing on a runway, I started screaming, “Bend down and grab your ankles!”

Just before touchdown I watched all the passengers go into the brace position. I wasn't buckled in my jumpseat on first impact. But when we bounced back up in the air, I yanked

the belt across my hips and clamped it shut.

On second impact, a ball of flames flashed through the cabin. I saw one of my passengers catch fire at the same instant I was thrown forward into the brace position. I heard a woman scream. Then the whole world disintegrated around me. Flying bits of debris filled the cabin. I felt as if I were strapped into a big cardboard box rolling down stairs. My arms and legs flailed in front of my face as I tumbled over and over and over. Through it all I kept screaming, “Stay down! Grab your ankles. Grab your ankles...”

**The real thing:** Suddenly everything stopped. Now the only sound invading the stillness was the crackling of flames spanning floor to ceiling in front of my jumpseat. For a second I wondered why I hadn't heard the emergency bells. But as my mind began to clear, I realised: “This is the real thing – a real emergency!”

With the wall of fire in front of me, I had only one way to go. I quickly unbuckled my seatbelt, stood, stepped back, and tried to force open the rear emergency exit between the bathrooms. But the handle wouldn't budge.

By now the smoke and fumes were searing my lungs. I began to cough and gasp for air. I knew that the toxic fumes were lethal within 30 seconds. I had to get out. But my vision began to go fuzzy. I watched my own hands slowly clawing their way down the emergency door as my body sagged to the floor.

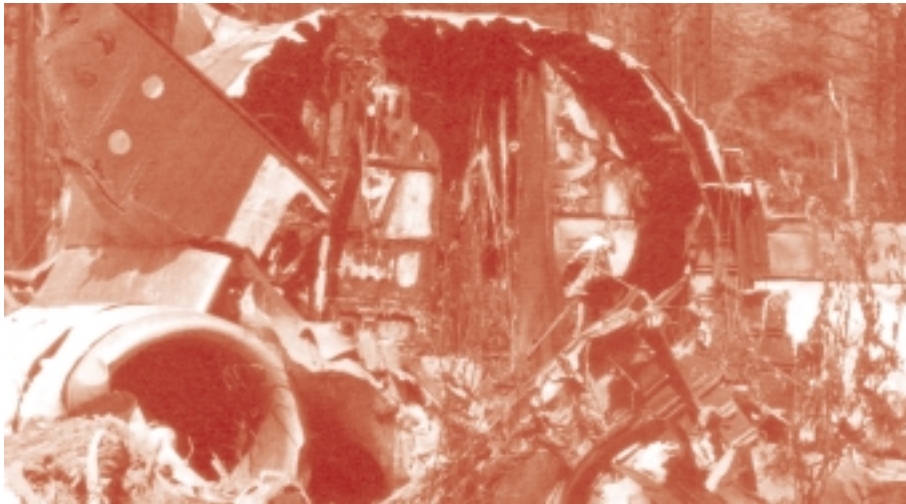
The next thing I knew I was coughing on the fumes again and screaming out a prayer in my mind, “God! I survived impact – please don't let me die here by myself between these bathrooms.”

Certain I would die if I stayed where I was, I stepped forward, determined to go through the fire to the first window exit in the cabin. “If I don't make it,” I thought, “at least I'll die with my passengers.”

But as I shielded my face with an arm and moved forward, the wall of flames parted like a curtain, and I stepped out of the plane onto solid ground.

I had taken only a half-dozen dazed steps away from the aircraft when an explosion knocked me to the ground. Sputtering and gagging on the dirt in my mouth, I looked back over my shoulder to see the tail section – with my jumpseat between the two bathrooms – completely engulfed in flames. The rear of the cabin had broken away between my seat and the last row of passengers.

Large, twisted pieces of the plane lay scattered around me. The stench of jet fuel, pine



Wreckage of the DC-9 tail section where Sandy Purl was sitting.

smoke, and burning flesh filled the air. Another explosion rocked the tail wreckage. Finally I picked myself up and staggered to the road.

**Saving lives:** When I reached the pavement, an awkward weight pulled at my shoulders. I looked down to see a burn-blackened body under each arm. Both men were dead. As I laid them down I tried to remember how they'd gotten there. But I didn't know.

For the first time I turned and looked at the holocaust stretching for hundreds of yards along that little country highway.

A man stumbled away from the biggest piece of wreckage and staggered toward the road. All his clothes had burned off him, except for his underwear and two strips of elastic around his ankles where his socks had been.

"If there's one survivor, maybe there are more." I ran back toward the two biggest sections of the cabin. The ground near the wreckage was covered with charred victims. One moved a leg, so I dragged him out of the wreckage to the road and hurriedly returned to search for anyone else who might still be alive. I checked every body I found for a twitch of the leg or a wiggling of a finger. The slightest movement offered a glimmer of hope.

But even as I dragged another passenger to the edge of the road, I felt so helpless. So alone. "I gotta get help." The thought became an instant obsession. I carefully eased the body I was carrying to the ground, looked around, and headed to the nearest home across the highway.

I heard a woman's voice screaming, "Help that boy, somebody help that boy!" The lady stood in a nearby driveway and pointed back toward the crash. I turned to see a seat that had rolled free from the cabin. The passenger was still strapped in, and struggling to get out.

But I didn't have time to go back. I had to get to a phone. As I ran up the driveway across the road from the crash, an elderly couple came out to stand terrified on their porch. Can I use your phone?" I asked. I have to call for help."

"Sure," the man nodded. But he was looking past me. His wife gasped, and I whirled to see why.

A passenger came half running, half reeling toward us. The back of his suit still smouldered. His arms and face were black with burns. I knocked him to the ground and rolled him in the grass to put out the fire. Ordering the couple to cover him and keep him still, I ran into the house.

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I found the phone with no trouble. But when I picked up the receiver I heard no dial tone. Seconds passed before I realised the phone was dead. I dropped the receiver and rushed back outside.

Rescue vehicles were beginning to arrive. "Help is coming," I thought.

While I tried to decide what to do next, I paced along the road, clenching and unclenching my fists, saying out loud, "Stay calm. Stay calm."

My most overpowering thought was that number one fact, drilled into us in training and in all the safety courses I'd had. "You are responsible for your passengers." I had to keep searching for survivors.

I ran back to the largest cabin section of the plane and began moving sheets of hot metal and pulling more bodies out of the wreckage. I shouted instructions at the gathering bystanders telling them to cover the people still alive and treat them for shock. And I did it all without thinking.

**Defence shield:** Something had snapped inside me; I was functioning purely on instinct and adrenaline. From the time I'd first reached the road and looked down to see the two corpses under my arm, I'd felt more like a dispassionate observer than a participant.

The one thing my mind didn't block out was the screeching of dozens of sirens, which seemed to wail on and on for eternity. Perhaps my mind used the screaming sirens to overload and short-circuit my senses and shut out everything else.

Within minutes I was aware of a host of emergency workers around me. They too sort-ed through the crumpled sheets of aluminum and dragged bodies away from the crash. "Help has arrived," I realised, feeling my first tinge of relief.

Suddenly I felt the urgent need to go to the bathroom. So I headed toward another house. To get there I had to walk through a gathering cluster of spectators who stood on the road and gawked at the carnage.

"Don't just stand there," I screamed. "Do something! Pray! Do something!" Anger surged through me. But they only shifted their attention to me for a moment before turning to stare again at the rescue workers.

A woman stood in her yard. I headed toward her. "I have to use your bathroom."

"Follow me, honey," she motioned, leading me into her home.

When I finished in the bathroom, the woman was waiting for me – with a cold wet washcloth and a hairbrush. She gently bathed my face, the washcloth turning black with soot by the time she finished. Then she brushed my hair back and fixed a pony-tail with a rubber band.

I thanked her and hurried outside again. By this time even more ambulances had gathered at the top of the hill. Dozens of fire-fighters hosed down the larger pieces of the plane. Emergency workers carried stretchers at a trot toward the waiting ambu-

lances. Others carried bodies toward a big yellow school bus that had been pulled onto a small gravel driveway among the trees near the top of the crash site. From overhead sounded the whomp-whomp-whomp of a rescue helicopter.

**Am I alive?** With no particular purpose in mind, I walked toward the emergency vehicles at the top of the hill. I couldn't escape the nagging feeling that there was something more I ought to be doing.

"Am I alive?" I asked a nurse who was loading a passenger onto an ambulance.

Turning to look at me, she smiled. "Yes," she nodded. "You're all right."

The nurse tried to talk me into one of the ambulances. A paramedic took my arm and tried to coax me to get on a stretcher. But I protested. "I'm okay. I'm okay. I'm one of the flight attendants, and I can identify pieces of the plane no one else would recognise. I can help you find bodies. I have to stay."

Insisting on my responsibility as a crew member, I finally thought of my undone duty. I realised what it was that I needed to do before I could leave the scene. I have to find the rest of the crew." I didn't know I'd been thinking aloud until the nurse responded, "We'll go with you."

So she followed as two ambulance attendants picked me up and carried me toward the far end of the crash site where I was sure I'd find the cockpit.

My rescue workers wanted to protect my lacerated feet, but I finally convinced them to let me down.

Finally I spotted the cockpit. "Over there," I shouted and began to run. But the sight I found when I reached it stopped me cold.



Emergency services line the highway where the DC-9 crashed, destroying a grocery store to the left before breaking up. Some of the wreckage can be seen in the trees beyond.

The front of the plane had been ripped off in front of the cabin door. Lyman, the first officer, still sat strapped in his seat as it dangled from what was left of the cockpit. He was staring straight ahead with his eyes wide open, his face expressionless.

The captain lay on the ground just a little way away, his face mutilated almost beyond recognition. I fell to my knees beside him and cried, "Bill, Bill!" In what seemed like a natural reaction at that moment, I put my hands over his face and pressed the pieces back together in an attempt to lend a semblance of dignity to his death. He was my friend, and I couldn't leave him like that.

Four men pulled me away as I kicked and fought. "Cover him up!" I screamed. "At least have the decency to cover him up!"

Back on the road, the men set me down.

But I took off again, running toward the yellow school bus, where a cluster of emergency personnel were working. There, among the trees, lay rows of sheet-draped bodies.

Two more stretcher-bearers climbed the hill with a load. When they approached, I looked to see if I could recognise the body. But there wasn't any body – only pieces of bodies, collected from the wreckage.

That awful sight finally cracked my emotional shield. I felt strength drain out of me with a gush. And I put both hands to my head and began to shake.

"Get me out of here!" I wailed. "Get me out of here. I just can't look anymore."

*Edited extract from "Am I Alive?" by Sandy Purl and Gregg Lewis. (Chevron Publishing Corporation.)*

## ANALYSIS > "She made the bionic woman look like Shirley Temple"

### Sue Rice

OF THE 85 PEOPLE on board Flight 242, 62 were killed, 22 were seriously injured, and one was slightly injured. Eight people on the ground were killed and one was seriously injured; one person died about one month later. The other flight attendant, Cathy Cooper was among the survivors.

Testimony given to the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) by surviving passengers and rescue workers, credited Sandy Purl for her courage and dedication. One man testified that, "She made the bionic woman look like Shirley Temple."

According to the NTSB, "The flight attendants

acted commendably for initiating a comprehensive emergency briefing of the passengers for their protection in preparation of the landing. This contributed to the number of survivors."

While the NTSB investigation focussed on the failure of the airline to provide the flight crew with up-to-date weather information, it did suggest that better communication between flight and cabin crew may have resulted in a lower death toll:

"Although the flight crew was preoccupied with trying to restart the engines and with selecting suitable landing areas...a few words from the flight crew to the flight attendants about the type of landing expected might have enabled

[them] to better prepare the passengers."

This is a personal account of a Flight Attendant who survived a major airline disaster over 20 years ago. Many changes in safety have occurred in our industry since the time of the accident. Through tragedy comes learning and improved procedures. Improvements in areas like CRM, training, harnesses, emergency exit seating and pre-take-off briefings, all increase the probability of survival. Take a moment to think about your current training practices in light of this story. Is there room for improvement?

*Sue Rice is a CASA senior air safety auditor.*